THE *DHARMA* OF ETHICS, THE ETHICS OF *DHARMA*

Quizzing the Ideals of Hinduism

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ABSTRACT

This paper is divided into six parts. The first presents a rudimentary definition of ethics based on Western philosophical theories, particularly their concern for articulating universal moral principles. The second examines the assumptions anchoring Western moral philosophies, and raises the question: are the philosophical presuppositions of modern Western philosophy consistent with the presuppositions of Hinduism? It concludes that the two are not entirely in agreement, particularly on the issue of personal and social identity. The third section locates areas in Hinduism that discursively concur with the concerns of Western ethicists, and explores the limits of the semblance. The fourth identifies problematic areas, and raises the question: should the idea of universal ethics be abandoned for Hinduism? The fifth section concludes that such abandonment would be hasty, and initiates a searching look into the Hindu epics for concepts that, while not identical with may still be parallel to some Western notions of ethics. The sixth looks at the content of normative Hindu morality, and generalizes on the basis of this content about the nature of "Hindu ethics".
KEY WORDS: *ascetics, saṃnyāsa, Upanisads, purity, Hinduism, virtue, ethics, non-violence*

THE REFLECTIONS IN THIS PAPER PROCEED from a consideration of my own recent research; in several ongoing projects, I have found myself speaking sagely about "ethical issues" in Hinduism (2000, 2001a, 2001b).[1] In this paper, I propose to scrutinize what I mean by "ethical issues", or more narrowly, what I mean by Hindu ethics. What do we mean when we use the word "ethics"? This is a Western term, developed as a discipline in Western philosophy. What assumptions are embedded in it? Are these presuppositions also descriptive of Hinduism? If not, may we apply the term ethics to Hinduism?

[1] My thanks to Frank Clooney and Lise Vail for their attentive reading of this essay, and their helpful criticisms.

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the issue of universalizability. The Western philosophical tradition, particularly since the modern period, has tended to give value to the general over the particular. One of the basic arguments of modern Western moral philosophers, especially since Kant, has been that a sound moral system must be universally applicable in order to be worthy of the name. I will use this perspective as a point of reference for a discussion of Hindu ethics. Does Hindu ethics admit general principles that are universally applicable? If so, how are they framed? If not, how does Hinduism view ethics? To phrase the question differently, what I am investigating is this: We know that Hinduism involves *dharma*; does it also do ethics? Are *dharma* and ethics the same thing? How are they similar and how different? What are the points of convergence and difference between the two?

Since it is not possible to provide complete answers to these questions in the space of one paper, what I will attempt here is a probing look at the underlying structure and logic of Hinduism, with the aim of teasing out areas where we might search for answers to these questions. Although I am speaking broadly of Hinduism, my remarks are confined to classical Hinduism, particularly the two Sanskrit epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

1. Western Philosophical Traditions

One of the concerns of Western moral philosophy, at least as far back as the Stoics but particularly in modern times, has been to identify universal principles upon which systems of ethics may be based. The consequentalism of the Utilitarians, for example, and the deontological ethics of Kant are at pains to locate essential precepts upon which conduct should be structured—the principle of utility for the Utilitarians, and the Categorical Imperatives for Kant. These principles are based upon assumptions about the common nucleus of human nature—humanity's desire for happiness, or humanity's unique capacity to reason. The more encompassing and inclusive a system is, presumably the better it reflects the nature of humanity. Modern Western ethical theory assumes, therefore, that the general is to be preferred to the particular; the specific and the contextual imply a capricious narrowness of thought that is potentially volatile and cannot be relied upon to achieve the best conduct in all humans.

Recent theories of ethics in the West have challenged the assumption that the general and abstract is more reliable and intellectually sophisticated than the specific. Feminist ethics, for example, and different strains of Communitarian Ethics argue that persons are not isolatable from their communities (see, e.g., Gilligan 1995, Friedman 1993, and Nedelsky 1999). In these latter interpretations, communities have an identity as a group that supersedes the identity of the individual, and

personhood needs to be read more contextually. The dominant strain of Western moral philosophy, however, is still the Modernist one, and it is the issues that arise from the biases of Modernist moral philosophy that engage me in this paper.

Problem one: "Hinduism does not do ethics"

"One looks in vain to traditional Hindu thought for a body of literature corresponding directly to that of the discipline of ethics in the West, or for a Sanskrit term equivalent to ethics," says Austin Creel in his 1977 work, *Dharma in Hindu Ethics*. He quotes various authorities: "In the words of [P.T.] Raju, 'There is a general lack of interest in ethical problems as such in Indian philosophy'... Devaraja speaks of 'the almost total absence of significant ethical theory in Indian thought'. E. Washburn Hopkins writes, 'The study of ethics for itself appealed neither to the jurist nor philosopher; like history, it is a subject incidentally broached, but never systematically pursued by the Hindus'" (Creel 1977, 20). Philosophical inquiry into Hindu ethics, apparently, is a modern activity; it seems that India as a whole had no interest in systematic discussions of ethics per se, though, as Creel reassures us: "That India in the past did not develop a branch of philosophy similar to ethics in the West is, of course, not tantamount to the absence of ethics in India" (Creel 1977, 21).[2] It would seem, therefore, that if one is to discuss the apparent oxymoron of Hindu Ethics, or more specifically Hindu Ethical Theory, one must begin with rudimentary definitions, and then determine how well Western ethics and Hindu *Dharma* translate into each other.

In his work *Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study*, Roy Perrett offers a simple definition of ethics. Ethics, he says, is fundamentally concerned with two questions: "What ought we to do?" and "Why ought we to do it?" (Perrett 1998, 1). An ethical theory, in turn, "typically involves two components: a theory of the Right and a theory of the Good" (Perrett 1998, 1). Theories of the Good in Hinduism, of the high values of the tradition, have been explicated at great length by scholars in every generation of Indological scholarship. It is the theories of the Right in Hinduism that

[2] Other scholars, however, disagree that India had no tradition of theorizing about ethics. I.C. Sharma attributes this view about India to Western scholars' "appalling ignorance of Indian philosophy in general, and Indian ethics in particular" (Sharma 1965, 2). In his view, ethics are "the main theme" of the Vedas and Mīmāṁsā: "Not only do we find in the *Rigvedic Mantras* the idea of universal moral law, but also the emphasis on non-violence and the cosmological foundation of the *Varṇa* and *Āśrama Dharmas*, which are the rock and foundation of Indian ethics" (Sharma 1965, 60). In his view, Hinduism has always had a systematic ethics, and the primary difference between Western ethics and Indian ethics is that the former tend to be theoretically oriented, and the latter pragmatic (Sharma 1965, 61).

concern us here. Theories of the Right furnish us with principles of conduct that circumscribe how we relate to each other and our world, in reference to the values toward which we are directed. In Western moral philosophy, the Good is identified variously: for example, happiness (Aristotle), pleasure (Mill), union with God (Aquinas), a good will (Kant); thinkers articulate ethics directed at the achievement of, or deriving from, these values. Thinkers differ on the source of moral codes—where they are anchored, or where they come from; they differ on the content of moral codes themselves; and they differ on the methods we should employ in implementing them. There is, however, a general consensus on the question of upon whom they are incumbent, that is, human beings. Modernist theories of ethics in particular are premised on the assumption of a generalized category of beings, persons, who act in some kind of morally informed way in relation to other persons. There is something called a "we", persons who are moral actors, moral agents. All persons whose reason is not seriously impaired are moral agents. Their personhood qualifies them for their moral agency. Hence, persons can be spoken of as a broad, generalized group, because they share certain pervasively familiar characteristics—humanity, moral sense, reason, and so forth.

Are these assumptions compatible with Hinduism?

The Ethics of Dharma

One of the challenges of interpreting Hinduism is that the tradition is extremely diverse. The primary literature is immense, of varying degrees of authority, and of several genres. Since each genre addresses different purposes but is still considered authoritative, Hindu literature as a whole rarely provides a straightforward answer to any question. If one concentrates one's search on post-Vedic classical Hindu literature, for example, one finds that the different philosophies arrive at a basic consensus about the good: *mokṣa*,[3] 'freedom', 'liberation', 'release'. Texts such as the *Mahābhārata*, schools such as Sāṁkhya and Yoga, and the different strands of Vedānta are in agreement about what constitutes the good. They also concur about the source of moral codes: the Vedas, which are held by some to be eternal and unauthored. Classical Hindu thought, therefore, is primarily soteriological, focused on the telos of *mokṣa*, and philosophical arguments are generally rehearsed within the parameters of this religious frame.[4] While the above are thus oriented toward

[3] Freedom *from* restrictions initiated by the Not-Self, and freedom *to* turn one's efforts into any creative direction: "Freedom from corresponds to his lack of attachment, and the freedom-to to his universal concern" (Potter 1999, 10).

[4] This has led some Western scholars to charge, to the indignation of many, that Indian philosophy is not, in fact, philosophy at all, but religion.

mokṣa, however, the immense *Dharmaśāstra* literature (the 'treatises on *dharma*') deals less with soteriological issues and more with worldly ones. It would seem self-evident, therefore, that if one is to look for discussions on ethics, it is to these texts that one must turn, texts that advertise their elaboration of the science of *dharma*. The self-evident, however, is misleading, for there are several considerations that complicate this picture. First, the *Dharmaśāstras*, the "worldly" literature, are composed with an eye to larger esoteric concerns. As J. Duncan M. Derrett explains, in Hinduism, law, ethics, and soteriology are always tied together: "The Indian teacher of the techniques of dispute-settlement would indeed be a specialist in a branch of the *śāstra* [the 'science' of *dharma*]; but unless he projected his study as a facet of the attainment of truth and enhancement of a supernatural order (not the mere quietening of complaints or enforcement of a royal policy), he would not be a *dharmaśāstri* [a teacher of the *Dharmaśāstras*]" (Derrett 1979, 2). The theory of the Good always forms the backdrop for the theory of the Right.

A second point to consider is that the tradition as a whole also acknowledges *levels* of the Right. Thus, certain actions may be provisionally in accordance with ethical standards that are cognitively available to the individual (given the limitations of his/her spiritual understanding), but they may be *ultimately* ill-advised, given the highest ethical ideals (more on this below). These considerations lead to ethical thinking that can be quite confounding, but any attempt at a comprehensive discussion of Hindu thinking on ethics must weigh in proper measure both levels of ethical formulations: those directed at the sophisticated intellects oriented toward the eternal, *mokṣa*; and also those directed at the less-evolved majority oriented toward the temporal, *saṃsāra*.

Problem two: The moral agent in Hinduism

Taken as a whole, we find that in Hinduism, the category of personhood itself is complex and contested. The same observation might be made for the Western tradition as well—that, notwithstanding the efforts of philosophers to identify comprehensive and all-inclusive ethical systems, historically, we have seen ethics that are particular to race, class, sex, and age, however informally devised.[5] In the Hindu tradition, however, the obvious particularity of human beings is a fact that is not only acknowledged, but is frankly and formally built into Hindu classifications of action. This candor has earned the tradition some notoriety. According to the logic of Hindu discussion about people in society,

[5] Indeed, perhaps the time has come for subjecting Western ethics to the analysis of non-Western categories; for example, for looking at Western ethics through the Indian idiom of *dharma*.

one cannot consistently speak simply of people, for one is not simply a person. One's identity is always contingent upon a host of other factors that locate a person socially. Some of these factors are hierarchical, such as those of class, caste, and sex. Others are more approximately relational. Thus, one is not simply a person; one is a man or a woman. One is not simply a worker in the public world, but one belongs to a particular occupational community—a community of sweepers, for example, or a community of scholars and philosophers, that is, a caste community. One's personhood is circumscribed by considerations of one's vocation, or stage of life—whether one is a student, for example, or whether one is an earning member of society, a householder. One's personhood is further elaborated by one's age and seniority in various hierarchies. Thus, one can never speak simply of a Pallavi Ramachandran as a moral agent without taking due account of numerous other factors that may be pertinent: Pallavi, who is female, who has a certain social standing—she belongs to a landowning caste community; Pallavi, who is married and therefore engaged in the householder stage of life; Pallavi, who, depending on the context, is a teacher or a student, a parent or a child, an elder or a younger, a citizen or an administrator. At least some of these considerations will dictate how Pallavi Ramachandran should behave in any given situation.

Implicit in this understanding of the moral agent is the contention that codes of conduct are not generalizable to all human beings. An act that may be very wrong for one person in a given situation may be quite defensible for another person. For example, acts of violence that would be capricious or wanton if performed in one scenario may be condoned, or even obligatory, if performed by the right people at the right time, limited to the right place, for the right duration of time (see Dhand 2000 for elaboration on this point).

The Hindu acknowledgement of differences among people is premised upon the idea that people are psychologically different. In the terminology of the *Sāṁkhya* philosophical school, terminology that becomes incorporated into the lexicon of all later schools, all matter (including the physical and psychic matter that composes human beings) is composed of three strands of qualities, or *guṇas*—lightness, energy, and heaviness. These qualities combine and manifest themselves in different ratios within different beings. Their disparate ratios of *guṇas* render individuals necessarily unique, and people therefore need different codes of conduct—different particular *dharmas*—to guide them. People manifesting high degrees of lightness in their mental and psychological frames must have different social responsibilities from people manifesting high degrees of energy and vigour. The former, for example, may be better suited to the responsibility of imparting learning, while the latter may be better equipped to defend the territory and maintain order.

We may agree, then, that in Hinduism, identity is problematized by a host of considerations. This is so to the extent that we might express it in provocatively counter-intuitive language: in the social world, there is no such thing as "a person" per se. There are only different types of people, and we cannot consider people in isolation from their difference, or our ethical codes risk being so beset with exceptions that they become incoherent, or just plain irrelevant.

Levels of Dharma

Question: Does the above mean that nowhere in Hinduism can we speak of people as just persons, without evoking memory of some particular aspect of them? Are people never simply a common classification of people? The answer to this is no, there is a way to speak of people as just persons. Perhaps paradoxically, at our innermost core, the soteriological strands of the tradition inform us, we are primarily and primordially *only* persons—*ātmans*, *jīvas*, or *puruṣas*: the terminology differs from school to school, but the concept remains the same (see, e.g., Hacker 1995). We are Selves, shorn of all qualifiers. We are not women or men, we are not *brāhmaṇas* or *śūdras*, we are not even animals or humans; we are only Selves, or Persons. The difficulty, however, is that few of us are conscious of this. Sometimes we intuit it, but that insight does not remain with us long. Few of us are consistently aware that the identities that we wear, as women or men, as scholars or sweepers, as black or white, are only superficial identities that we take on, from lifetime to lifetime, as we wear different clothes (see Gita II.22). In *fact*, we are all Persons, but being engrossed in a distracting world, we are not cognizant of our true identity. Hence we bumble along, in the mistaken belief that we really are teachers and lawyers, men and women, deriving a fool's comfort from our common consensus of ignorance.

The discovery of this first identity is the object of all spiritual search in Hinduism.[6] It is pursued through various well-rehearsed methods: *bhakti* (self-negating absorption in God), *jñāna* (the pursuit of wisdom through contemplation, asceticism, or yoga), *karma* (rightly-performed action) or some variant of these. The aim of religious practice is to discover our primordial and inviolable personhood, and to intuit its

[6] As Hacker states, in reference to the Vedāntic systems, "Reflecting on the core or authentic being of man was . . . no philosophical 'theory', no purely intellectual hobby, and the instruction about it was not the business of 'education' or 'culture'. Rather, such reflection was understood as a quest, and such instruction as a way toward the *true goal* . . . The abiding tendency of all Vedānta thinking is pressed in a statement transmitted in the *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*: 'There is nothing higher than attaining the Self'" (153, original italics).

difference from the contingent identity that usually passes for personhood in the ordinary course of our lives.

The obvious question for ethics that arises from this is: if, as we are now asserting, there *is* a generalizable category called persons, who are persons only and nothing else, is there also a code of conduct that applies to all persons at all times, without qualification?

The answer to this is yes: there is a code of conduct that, the *Mahābhārata*, (the Great Epic) says, applies to all persons without qualification, and the *Mahābhārata* also calls this *dharma*. *Dharma* in this context is "that which strives for the benefit of creatures; *dharma* is so called because it is wedded to *ahiṁsā* (non-harmfulness)" (XII.110.10).[7] *Dharma* is not about one's placement on a social scale, and the management of one's relationships on that scale. Rather, it is a simple imperative: "*Dharma* is . . . friendliness, which [works for] the welfare of all" (XII.254.5). *Dharma* enjoins care of all beings, irrespective of social standing or even species: "*Dharma* is so called because it supports [beings]. People are supported by *dharma*. Because it is attached to the support [of beings], it is called *dharma*" (XII.110.11).[8] A person devoted to this *dharma*, therefore, is identified by his/her solicitude and kindness towards others.

Persons who know, and are in touch with their personhood are described by their calmness, their patience, their perfect balance of mind. One epic character, Pandu, captures the ideal in a passage from the Ādiparva. "If a man hacks off my arm with a hatchet, and another anoints the other arm with sandalpaste, I shall think neither good of one, nor ill of the other. I shall do nothing out of a will to live, or a will to die; and neither welcome life nor turn away death" (I.110.14–15 in van Buitenen's translation). The sage is described in the *Śāntiparva*: "He is one into

[7] All translations are my own, except where otherwise noted.

[8] Hiltebeitel translates the Sanskrit *dharmeṇa vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ* as "By *dharma*, beings are held apart," to yield the interpretation, following Halbfass, that "creatures are kept apart, i.e., upheld in their respective identities by *dharma*" (Hiltebeitel 2001, 204). The import of such a translation is to assert that the main function of *dharma* is to confine individuals to their caste-bound roles. "To hold apart" is one reasonable translation of *vidhṛ*, but it goes against not only much of the ecumenical spirit of the *mokṣadharma* section of the *Śāntiparva* (in which the passage is found), but also against the immediate context in which the passage occurs. The *śloka* directly preceding it for example, maintains that "*Dharma* was created by Brahmā for the advancement/growth of creatures; whatever is attached to *ahiṁsā* is *dharma*, so it is determined" (*prabhāvārthāya bhūtānāṁ dharmapravacanaṁ kṛtaṃ / yasyadahiṁsāsaṁyuktam sa dharma iti niścayaḥ* (XII.110.10). The passage being reinterpreted is a parallel construction to this passage: "Because it is attached to *ahiṁsā*, it is called *dharma*," "Because it is attached to its support of beings, it is called *dharma*." The context therefore makes it very clear that *vidhṛ* in this instance has the more common meaning of "to hold, bear, carry . . . to support, maintain" (Monier-Williams 1999, 968); or "to maintain, bear, support, hold up" (Apte 1992, 859). I therefore cannot agree with Hiltebeitel's re-reading in this instance.

whom words enter like frightened elephants into a well and never come out. He hears no evil of others. He remembers no evil. When dispraised, he is silent" (*tūṣṇīmāsīt nindāyām*; XII.237.10). The same passage continues, "He can make a spot teeming with people seem perfectly still (XII.237.11) . . . [Such a person] is never glad when honoured, never angry when insulted, assures all creatures of his compassion" (XII.237.8–26). One who is in touch with his primeval personhood is one "whose life is the practice of *dharma* (*jīvitaṁ yasya dharmārtham* XII.237.23), who feels distressed at causing grief to others, and who embraces non-injurious conduct (*ahiṁsā pratipadyate* XII.237.19). Such a person's cardinal ethic is that of non-harmfulness, of avoiding injury to other beings.

Another classical text, Patanjali's *Yogasūtra*, also prescribes a common code of conduct for all aspiring toward freedom, in its *yamas* and *nīyamas*, the first two steps of an eight-step path to Self-realization. The *yamas*, "restraints" or "disciplines", involve assiduous attention to five ethical precepts: *ahiṁsā* (non-harmfulness), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacārya* (chastity), and *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness or non-grasping). In addition to the five *yamas*, or restraints, one is also bound by several *nīyamas*, or habits of culture that must be cultivated. These are also five: *śauca* (cleanliness or purity), *santośa* (contentment, calm), *tapas* (austerity or stoic endurance of discomfort without complaint), *svadhyāya* (the habit of study and reflection), *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* (meditation on *Īśvara*, the First Person, *paramapuruṣa*, 'God') (*Yogasūtra* II.32).

These are the critical prerequisites for yogic practice. Without moral perfection, one cannot hope to accomplish spiritual goals, for sin, crime, and desire are obstacles on the religious path, and inhibit one's ability to achieve the focused concentration and charitable disposition that are requisite to Self-realization (*Yogasūtra* II.30–31).

There are to be found, then, in Hinduism, moral codes that apply to all persons, regardless of class, caste, sex, or other markers. The content of these protocols is properly ethical. They stipulate the diligent care of other beings, scrupulous of the cardinal ethic of non-harmfulness first and foremost, as well as truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion. They are geared toward self-cultivation.

Problem three: To know well is to do well, but how many people know?

The problem with these universal ethics, however, is with their implementation, for they are premised on a certain degree of Self-consciousness in the individual to begin with. That is to say, while they insist upon their universal relevance,[9] in order to recognize the authority

[9] "If these [high qualities] are evident in a *śūdra*, but are not found in a *brāhmaṇa*, then the *śūdra* is not a *śūdra*, and the *brāhmana* is not a *brāhmana*" (XII.182.8). "A wise

of these most fundamental ethics, one must already be at a stage of spiritual development where one can recognize all-embracing precepts as being superior to and superseding the narrower ones of class, caste, sex, and so on. A properly universal code of ethics, then, is premised upon epistemology.[10] While this universalist *dharma* is hailed as being both the primary and the most crucial ethic, it is dependent upon the spiritual insight and wisdom of the individual.

It would also appear from the above that ethics and self-cultivation are not separate acts; they are, in fact, the same thing. In refining one's moral acts, one is cultivating oneself, and in cultivating oneself, one refines one's moral acts. Is one therefore still doing ethics? In the Hindu view, it would seem that one acts altruistically, but that this is not a rehearsed or practised kind of altruism; rather, one's altruism is the spontaneous and unprompted expression of one's mental and spiritual self-refinement. This is reminiscent of the genre of virtue ethics developed in the West. Virtue ethics, which is experiencing a renewed interest among Western moral philosophers—who trace it back to Aristotle, "still held to be its finest exponent" (Simpson 1997, 245)—emphasizes agent-centred methods over action-centred ones. One could argue that all Indian ethics have been primarily virtue ethics. In Hinduism, paradoxically perhaps, the Self-absorbed one is the embodiment of the highest *dharma*.

2. There's a *Dharma* for the Ordinary World, But Is There Ethics?

We have determined thus far that there is a common *dharma* in Hinduism that applies to "persons" at all times and under all circumstances, but that it is problematized by the fact that its implementation rests upon individuals' level of knowledge. Given that most ordinary people are not so spiritually sagacious as to recognize the priority of this universal *dharma*, one has to ask: what of the *dharma* of ordinary people, of the spiritually ignorant and misguided; in other words, what about the *dharma* of the majority of human beings? Is there no general code of conduct that we must all observe, no minimum of behaviour that applies to all human beings at all times?

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man is one who looks equally upon a *brāhmaṇa* who has disciples and knowledge, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater" (XII.231.19).

[10] "There are different levels of being or existence, as surely as there are different cognitive standpoints corresponding to them. What it all suggests . . . is that there is a hierarchy of truths. Thus, there are lower truths (*aparā vidyā*), and likewise, there are higher truths (*parā vidyā*). The highest truth comprehends the lower truths, and is in this sense supreme in status (*satyasya satyaṃ*)" (Balbir Singh 1991, 1). The Vedas themselves assert the distinction between reality and appearance (3).

We observed in our opening passages that according to Hinduism, in the ordinary social world, we are never simply people for whom a generalized code of conduct can be prescribed. Rather, we are beings whose very existence is bounded by various factors. Any code of conduct, therefore, must be particular to each of us in our particular stations. Thus, Heesterman:

> [In order for literature on *dharma* to] fulfill its task of giving guidelines for society, it has to take into account the exigencies of normal life as well as the various, often conflicting customs and usages of many and varied communities, ranging from tribals to sophisticated urbanites and from socially active men to solitary hermit. The *dharma* . . . has to function in the middle of the rough and tumble of society (Heesterman 1978, 84).

Hence there is a *dharma* that tells us how we should conduct ourselves as women (*strīdharma*), a *dharma* that advises us on our occupational or vocational conduct (*varṇadharma*), a *dharma* that informs us about what is appropriate for our stage of life as householders with children (*āśramadharma*), and a *dharma* that sketches out the duties of elders to youngers, kin to kin (*kuladharma*). To identify the right course of action for any particular time is to engage in an act of moral judgment. At all times, one has several possible duties to perform, given one's location on numerous interlocking matrices of relationships. One must determine which duty is the most pressing at any one time and act accordingly. This is the dilemma that Arjuna famously faces at the beginning of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Arjuna is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as being called to choose between the ethics of violence and non-violence, but that is in fact a misunderstanding of the scenario. Arjuna's choice is between two subsets of his particular *dharma*, his *kuladharma* and his *varṇadharma*. His *kuladharma*, the *dharma* of the family, dictates that one does not injure one's family. One especially does not kill one's grandparents and gurus, to whom one owes undying reverence and protection. His *varṇadharma*, however, the *dharma* of his occupation as a warrior, requires him to kill whoever may be his foe in battle. In this case, it is revered members of his family who are positioned as his adversaries. Which *dharma* is the more pressing? Whatever decision he makes, he must violate one or the other duty. His challenge is to determine which is the most compelling *dharma* for his situation.[11]

It would seem from this painstaking attention to the particularities of each individual's situation that there is no room left in Hinduism for a common *dharma* for ordinary, flawed, unenlightened folk. In fact, however, the tradition does admit of a common *dharma* that it says applies to

[11] There are other complexities in the situation as well. I have discussed these in Dhand 2001a.

all human beings at all times at all places regardless of sex, caste, or stage of life. This it calls *sādhāraṇa*, or *sāmānya dharma*: "common *dharma*". *Sādhāraṇa dharma* is, in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's pithy description, "rather like the Ten Commandments—easily memorized, not so easily followed" (O'Flaherty 1978, 96). As detailed in the *Mahābhārata*, it cherishes nine ideals that all human beings must practise: the restraint of anger, truthfulness of speech, an agreeable nature, forgiveness, begetting children upon one's own wives, purity of conduct, avoidance of quarrel, simplicity, and the maintenance of dependants (XII:60.7–8). These are duties said to be incumbent upon all individuals at all times. Alternate codes of common *dharma*, with some modifications, may be located in other classical texts.[12]

Problem four: The general and the specific, simultaneously?

Apparently, then, there *is* a concern in Hinduism for articulating a common ethical standard that is applicable to all (ordinary) people at all times, and which supersedes the codes that are predicated upon the particulars of a person's embodied existence. Having said that, however, there are several problems with these common codes. One is that they are not always entirely general. In the *Mahābhārata* citation offered above, for example, "common" *dharma* is in fact quite specific to men, for whom alone the injunction to beget children upon wives can be meaningful. Other codes also sometimes address a male audience, even though this is not made explicit. Furthermore, it becomes apparent from the context of these codes that even the male audience being addressed is limited only to "twice-born" males (males of the upper three classes), who are the primary reference point for the classical lawbooks. *Śūdras* and women are given separate instructions, or are simply not considered.

If these *sādhāraṇa dharmas* were not plagued with the above concerns, there are other factors to be considered. For example, notwithstanding protestations about their universality, these common codes are given little attention in Hindu lawbooks, and typically, much greater attention goes toward detailing the many specifics of what wives owe to husbands, and husbands to wives; what *kṣatriyas* owe to *brāhmaṇas*, and *brāhmaṇas* to *kṣatriyas*.

[12] *Vasiṣṭha* 4.4, *Manu* 4.175, *Yājñavalkya* 1.122, Mitākṣara on *Yājñavalkya* 1.1, *Gautama* 8.23–24 and 10.52, *Manu* 10.63, and the *Matsya Purāṇa* 52.8–10. *The Vāmana Purāṇa* specifies the ten-fold *dharma* for all classes as non-injury, truth, purity, non-stealing, charity, forbearance, self-restraint, tranquility, generosity, and asceticism (14.1–2). The *Arthaśāstra* stipulates that all men must cultivate non-injury, truth, purity, goodwill, mercy and patience (1.3.13, Kane, II.3–11).

There is also a more serious logical question. If we have a minimum standard of behaviour that we claim is universally applicable at all times to all people regardless of difference, and then we also have particular *dharmas* that directly contradict the common standard—a *kṣatriya*'s duty to kill vs. one's common duty to uphold *ahiṁsā* (non-harmfulness), for example—do we have a common standard of behaviour at all?[13] Is it not compromised to such a degree that to conceive of it as a universally applicable minimum is itself an absurdity? It would seem, therefore, that as long as one recognizes the obligation of particular *dharmas*, the concept of a common *dharma* is a fallacy. In the realm of ordinary social functioning, it seems logically that there cannot be a common *dharma*. All there can be is relational *dharma*, one which defines how particular individuals interact with other particular individuals, with due attention to the specifics of the relationship.

We seem now to be at an impasse. Clearly, if we are looking for a common code of conduct incumbent upon all Hindus, the *Dharmaśāstras*, the texts most directly purporting to deal with *dharma*, have failed us. Can we conclude from this situation that classical Hinduism did not have any sincere, whole-hearted, or serious intent of elaborating rigorous ideals for how all individuals in the ordinary world should behave with each other?

In spite of the very serious challenges, I believe this would be a hasty conclusion. The imbalance noted in the *Dharmaśāstras* is no doubt at least partly the result of genre. The *Dharmaśāstras* are legalist texts rather than moral ones, as they are sometimes mistaken to be.[14] Their purpose was to set the guidelines for how individuals in society should function in relation to each other, so as to minimize disputes. Much as modern constitutions occupy more of their time in delineating legal and conventional boundaries between people than in discussing morality, so the classical lawbooks are less concerned with ethics and more with the regulation of society. But is there anywhere else in classical Hindu literature that we can look for a common and authoritative code of ethics?

Hinduism does not have the clearly articulated moral paths that are typical of the traditions of Buddhism and Jainism, yielding the simplicity

[13] As O'Flaherty notes, for example, conflicts between particular *dharma* and common *dharma* were almost always resolved by having the common *dharma* overruled by particular *dharma* (O'Flaherty 1978, 96–97). Rajendra Prasad, however, in his *Varṇadharma, Niṣkāma Karma and Practical Morality*, would seem to disagree. In his study, according to the "general classical Indian theory of values," whenever there is a conflict between an individual duty and *sādhārana dharma*, "the *sādhārana dharma* should override the former" (Prasad 1999, 20–21).

[14] As noted by P.V. Kane, for example, the concern of Dharmaśāstra writers was not predominantly ethical theory, but the practical guidance of people in everyday life with reference to their station in society (I.I.4; II.I.11).

in these traditions that makes them more culturally accessible to individuals concerned with ethics. Hindu ethics must be coaxed from a number of sources. These sources rarely pronounce moral principles as categorical imperatives. Rather, they weave them together with other aspects of Hindu lore. If we are to make any progress at understanding normative Hindu ethics, it is here that we must look.

The common codes of *dharma* articulated in the *Dharmaśāstras* have served as red herrings for generations of Indological scholarship. I believe that Hindu beliefs about common *dharma* are more subtly adumbrated: they are encoded into the behaviours of idealized epic characters of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. All cultures feed their young on morsels of the culture's foundational myths, but this is perhaps more true of Hindu culture than many others. Hindu children are raised on the bounty of nutriment gained from the Hindu epics, and it is from these that Hindus first learn how to orient themselves morally to their world.[15] This is the reason for the continuing currency and relevance of the Hindu epics, which have survived and thrived through the millennia, even where their cognates in other cultures have succumbed to historical erosion and retain only liminal cultural value. The Hindu epics, simultaneously performative, narrative, and didactic, form the core vocabulary of every artistic arena in Hinduism, and indeed, of the larger cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. Moral instruction is gleaned through constant exposure to them in various idioms. Ultimately, one aspires not simply to emulation of epic characters, but to an active re-creation or grafting of the epic narrative onto one's own individual life.

In the epics, we find that there is a common *dharma* of sorts developed, but it never in fact stops being relational; rather, a vocabulary for general ethics is extracted, retrieved from the lexicon of the relational. Perhaps paradoxically, one is taught how to behave toward all human beings by learning how to behave as a particular person in particular relationships.

3. The *Maryādā-Avatāra*: Rāma

The most resilient ideal of human character in Hinduism, through the ages, in text and in popular culture, is the hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, the

[15] As Prasad notes, for example, while *dharma* appears in the earliest strains of Hindu literature, "its natural homeland seems to be the world of the Purāṇas, epics and *smṛtis*" (4). Says Ronald M. Green, "Although Westerners tend to think of Indian religion in terms of major 'philosophical' writings like the Upaniṣads, the Bhagavad Gītā or the Buddhist sūtras, it is arguable that the Rāmāyaṇa, through the Vālmīki original and its many vernacular retellings, has probably had the most pronounced effect of any single text in forming religious and cultural ideals in India and in the lands shaped by its civilization." (Green 1988, 196–197)

prince Rāma.[16] The story, briefly, is as follows. Rāma is the eldest of four sons of a doting father, the king Daśaratha of Kośāla. King Daśaratha is represented as being generous and righteous, a king who conducts himself as a father to his subjects. He is not always wise, however, for through a misguided promise to an envious junior wife, he inadvertently agrees to disinherit his eldest and most deserving son, and to banish him from the realm for a period of fourteen years. Rāma is this eldest son. The king demurs before imposing banishment upon his favourite son, but Rāma, against the counsel of his mother and brother, insists upon going, in order to honour his father's word. Accompanied by wife Sītā and brother Lakṣmaṇa, he spends fourteen long years eking out an austere subsistence in the forest, assailed by many misfortunes. In the most traumatic one, Rāma's wife Sītā is kidnapped by a demonic king and held in captivity for a year. A grief-stricken Rāma must determine her whereabouts, amass an unlikely army, and fight a ferocious war in order to win her back. Rāma succeeds in all this, and after the war, the three departed ones return home to jubilant celebration, having completed their period of exile. In an epilogue to the poem, one hears that shortly into his reign, Rāma's judgment in keeping Sītā is questioned by his people. He yields to what he considers his *dharma* as a king beholden to his people by sending Sītā to the forest, where she bears twin boys.

Hindu children the world over begin their religious lives with this story, related not as a bare plot as I have narrated it, but lovingly embellished with detail and emotion and lingering with sensitivity on all the moral values that Hinduism seeks to impart to its children. Rāma grows up in a family in which his father has three wives, but in his own life he chooses to remain scrupulously monogamous. The rivalries among his father's wives threaten to divide the family, but Rāma's reactions to the various injustices suffered by him are distinguished by several qualities. He maintains an unwavering filial love for his father. Filial attachment entails, in Rāma's interpretation, not simply unstinting respect and reverence and an effort to fulfill his father's wishes, but more, a commitment to achieving the best interests of his father, even if that necessitates disobedience to the father's will and causing his father pain. In this case, Rāma insists upon honouring his father's foolishly-made promise to disinherit and banish his son. He insists upon it because his actions are necessary for his father to remain in accordance with *dharma*, and he perseveres even though his father, in paroxysms of weakness, pleads with him not to go.

[16] Although recently some have argued that Rāma's wife, Sītā, is better qualified as an ideal of human conduct. See, for example, Madhu Kishwar, "Yes to Sītā, No to Rām." We will persevere with the traditional view for the time being.

The direct cause of Rāma's misfortunes is his petulant youngest stepmother, Kaikeyī. It would seem natural for Rāma to feel resentful of her, and this is the reaction of his hot-headed stepbrother, Lakṣmaṇa, who advocates open rebellion (II.18.8–12), and even of Kaikeyī's own son, Bharata, who disowns his mother when he learns of her machinations (II.67–68). Rāma, however, defends Kaikeyī to his brother: "It is not our younger mother, Lakṣmaṇa, who should be blamed for preventing my becoming king. People overmastered by fate say things they never wanted to—you know fate has such power" (II.19.22). He insists upon her right as his mother to demand any sacrifice of him (II.19.13–18, II.16.50), and asserts that there should be no difference in his manner toward any of his mothers, step or natural; all three of his father's wives are equally his mothers, and deserve the same love, loyalty, and respect that he would owe his natural mother (II.19.15).[17]

Rāma's relationships with his juniors are marked by a similarly affectionate attitude. Here, however, we see a love that can chide and cajole, that explains and guides, but with both gentleness and humour. It is a love that is filled with indulgent amusement at the childishness, the impetuosity of the junior, but is still firm in its adherence to *dharma*, leading by example.

What of Rāma's relationships with his intimates, with his spouse and with people who are presumably his peers? This is the most complex and contentious aspect of Rāma's relationships. The Vedic ideal for the spousal relationship was that of a *sahadharma*, a union in the literal sense, a "becoming-one-ness". This was a union in which both members had different functions, but both were partners in the performance of *dharma*; "It is known from tradition that half of oneself is the wife" (BSS XXIX.9 (391:2), cited in Jamison 1996). There was to be no duality between them; they were one and to act as one. To participate in Vedic ritual, husband and wife had to act together. One's spouse was half of oneself, an extension of oneself; indeed, one's own self. One was therefore entitled to commit the labour of one's spouse, the time of one's spouse, the work of one's spouse, because in doing so, one was committing only oneself.[18]

In the sacrifice of one's spouse, therefore, one also sacrifices oneself. One's sternness toward one's spouse is parallel to, and equally

[17] A similar sentiment is expressed by Yudhiṣṭhira, the "king of *dharma*" in the *Mahābhārata*; when he is called to choose one among his four brothers to live, he chooses his stepbrother Nakula, on the argument that both his mothers should be treated equally. If Kuntī has one living son (himself), then Mādrī also must have one living son. He will recognize no difference between them: "As Kuntī was, so was Mādrī. I allow no difference between them. I want the same for both of my mothers" (III.297.73).

[18] This is sometimes carried to extreme lengths. The story of Sudarśana and Oghāvatī, recounted in the Mahābhārata, might qualify as one example of a hyperbolic understanding of the common goals of the married couple (XIII.2).

represents, one's sternness with oneself. Thus, in Rāma's repudiation of Sītā in the Uttarakāṇḍa, in response to the concerns of his subjects, Sītā suffers, but in Rāma's mind, so does he.[19] Sītā's suffering is his suffering; in sending Sītā away, Rāma deprives himself of her love and comfort and companionship, and frets about her. He therefore suffers anguish himself. Rāma's actions relating to Sītā represent his severity with himself.

One's conduct with one's spouse, then, is the same as one's conduct with oneself. There is no boundary line dividing one from one's spouse. Sītā is Rāma himself, and therefore there is in that relationship the love, trust, faith, commitment, and real intimacy that Rāma presumably has with his own self. The converse of this is that in all of his relationships, Rāma is also more severe with himself than he is with anybody else. It in this light that his severity with Sītā needs to be understood.[20]

One can thus observe Rāma's conduct in all his relationships. His manner toward his elders is one of respectful deference—a deference, however, that does not compromise his own conviction of what is right

[19] This is not, of course, a satisfying explanation for Hindus, and never has been. Rāma has always been criticized for this action: "The Indian literary tradition has explored the tragic dimension of Rāma's action and has offered various solutions to the problems it raises—since there is no doubt that Sītā's punishment is entirely unmerited, as Rāma himself clearly knows" (Shulman 1991, 89–90).

[20] Again, this last aspect of the ideal person's behaviour, his conduct with his wife, has excited the unease of Hindus since the earliest re-tellings of the Rāmāyana. Different writers, such as Kampaṉ in his *Irāmāvatāram*, leave the episode out altogether, or disguise it in some fashion, having Sītā voluntarily choose exile, rather than be exiled (see, for example, A.K. Ramanujan, *Three Hundred Rāmāyanas*). Similarly, this very episode has been the source of Rāma's infamy with modern Hindus, men and women alike. The reason for this is that while the ideal may be noble if it were reciprocal—if a woman had the same privilege, of committing the labour or the sacrifice of the man as the man did—it is a fact that the Vedic tradition was highly patriarchal. The man was the focal point of the system. While he was incomplete without his wife, and could not participate in the ritual sphere without his wife, his wife was considered his helpmate, his enabler, rather than an individuated religious being in her own right. Thus, while in theory husband and wife were to act as one, and were equally responsible for the performance of *dharma*, in actual practice, the man enjoyed a disproportionate degree of privilege in determining the course of the relationship than did the woman.

In the particular case of Rāma, Pollock points out that one narrative consideration must be that the poet intends for Rāma's character to be a foil to that of his father. Where Daśaratha proves weak in will and lacking courage, Rāma displays exemplary courage and a sturdy will in his commitment to *dharma* (59). What Pollock doesn't remark, however, is that Rāma's repudiation of Sītā in the Uttarakāṇḍa may well be another aspect of the same theme. Thus, whereas Daśaratha destroyed the house of Raghu with reckless and undisciplined sexual desire for one woman, Rāma displays tremendous self-control in his desire for his wife—a wife only recently recovered through heroic hardship, and a wife whom Rāma passionately adores, as apparent in his many grieved lamentations in the forest books. Rāma will not let his own desire stand in the way of what he considers necessary to his duty as a ruler.

conduct at the moment. It is, in other words, a deference that resists the temptations of lurching emotionality, that recognizes that elders often have weaknesses, and may take an easier path than the truly *dharmic*. Through his own conduct, his sternness with himself, Rāma disallows elders to shrink from their *dharma*, with the view that the most loving thing one can do for one's loved ones is to keep them firm in their commitment to *dharma*, to gird their strength and to see them through their emotion-generated weak moments. His own virtuous stoicism is intended to be an example to them, and they must pull themselves up as a result of it.

4. Hindu Ethics for the Ordinary World

A study of the conduct of the ideal man, Rāma, gives us a good idea of the values that Hindus prize in their lives, and according to which they structure their own relationships. This is, as noted above, the primary function of the Rāmāyaṇa; it is meant to instruct. Says Sheldon I. Pollock, in his introduction to the second volume of the translation of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*,

> In some respects, it may be erroneous for us to think of the protagonist of the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a hero. Properly understood, heroes are those who do great things in the face of certain defeat... they far transcend us and are not figures we are supposed to emulate. Rāma emphatically is; and the various types of behaviour that he exemplifies—filial devotion, for example, or obedience [are meant to be paradigmatic] (Pollock 1986, 64).

The entire community, and even Rāma's guru Vasiṣṭha are guided by Rāma to the path of the Right; "at every step of the way, Rāma must instruct each in his proper role: his mother (18.26–31, 21.9.22), his father (31.25, 32), his brothers Lakṣmaṇa (18.32–36, 20.36, 91.2–6) Bharata (97.17–24, 98.37–39, 99.8–14), and his ministers (101)" (Pollock 1986, 64). Rāma's first and foremost concern is with righteousness, *dharma*; he tells his stepmother: "It is not in the hopes of gain that I suffer living in the world. You should know that... I have but one concern, and that is *dharma*" (II.16.46).

What is this *dharma*? Is it the famous *varṇāśramadharma*, that guides class and age relationships, or is it some inner intuition of the right to which Rāma holds? Clearly, some part of Rāma's *dharma* is consistent with a traditional scheme of social ethics that directs one's conduct with all of one's kin and society. *Dharma*, however, is also profoundly *ethical*, in that it is concerned with core moral principles. It is, above all, about "truth, righteousness, and strenuous effort, compassion for creatures and kindly words, reverence for *brāhmaṇas*, gods, and guests" (II.101.30). The demands of conscience are valorized, for Rāma acts with reference to an inner sense of right and wrong. He acts, he says, out of a "personal

code of righteousness, one that he knows to be correct, and which is eternal" (II.101.19, II.16.52), and he is uncompromisingly "secure in the conviction that the imperatives he is honoring must take precedence, since they are fundamental" (Pollock 1986, 64). Thus, Rāma rejects his *kṣatriya*, or caste-ordained *dharma*, as being ignoble: "debased, vicious, covetous" (II.101.20), and chides his brother for depending upon it: "Give up this ignoble notion that is based on the code of the *kṣatriyas*; be of like mind with me and base your actions on righteousness, not violence" (II.18.36). In so doing, he subsumes "his caste-specific *dharma* under a larger, superordinate *dharma*, [and] he loosens the claims of the former by the same power that had given them their strength" (Pollock 1986, 69).

In Rāma, then, Hinduism puts forth a powerful ideal for how people should conduct themselves in the world, even in the midst of indignity.[21] It would appear that if there is one ethic informing all of Rāma's actions in the *Rāmāyana*, it is a stoic courage, a willingness to bear all hardship for an uncompromising commitment to *dharma*. Doing one's duty, as interpreted by Rāma, means holding one's own interests in the lowest regard, and exerting oneself for the well-being of the family (understood broadly, to include all step, extended, and adopted family) with an attitude of ascetic equanimity, within the vigilant constraints of a *dharma* that is defined not simply socially, but ethically.[22] Friends and wife are personal, individualistic interests, for one's own personal enjoyment, and therefore yield before duty.

5. The Ethics of the Familial Self

One striking aspect of all of these principles of conduct is that they are elaborated within the domain of the family. There is a concept of outsiders to the family—gurus, for example, or rulers—but such characters are still viewed as being extensions of the family in some sense. One can

[21] This is not to claim that Rāma's conduct has been considered to be above reproach in every situation, for "even perfection has its problems" (Shulman 1991, 89). Indeed, several events have irked the tradition as being problematic. "The problem of Rāma's composite identity, with the related themes of inner conflict and epistemic wavering, is central to the whole of Vālmīki's text" and has been re-worked repeatedly in literature on the Rāmāyaṇa (Shulman 2000, 61).

[22] In Green's analysis, the epic's chief interest is "not in presenting models of virtuous conduct—though there is much of that—but in offering a detailed and penetrating analysis of the process of reasoned moral decision making... In almost no instance are moral conflicts resolvable by a simple appeal to moral rules, since the rules here usually conflict. Nor does the presumed virtue or vice of the actors establish the rightness or wrongness of their choices... Only careful attention to the reasoning process by which individuals arrive at decisions helps make clear the meaning of right or wrong choice" (Green 1988, 206).

find numerous statements in the epics that equate the guru with the father or mother, and vice versa; the concept of guru and parent are used interchangeably, to evoke the image of one who is worthy of the highest esteem: For example: "One mother is superior to ten fathers and indeed the whole world in importance. No one carries greater weight than a mother. There is no guru like a mother" (XII.109.16). The guru is an extension of the family. Similarly, a ruler is very much an outsider to the family, but even this is not entirely clear; Rāma, for example, refers to his father as "my father, my benefactor, guru, and king" (II.16.31). The ideal that Aśoka proclaims in his edicts of the righteous king, as one who conducts himself as a father to his subjects, was a pan-Indic ideal, found in both epics. The ruler-subject relationship is frequently conceived as a paternal-filial one.

One may conclude, therefore, that Rāma's *dharmic* conduct has a familial frame of reference. His high ideals are meant to be practised within the confines of familial relationships, real or fictive, and it is in this familial frame that one can find *dharma* best exemplified: "Since Indians have a strong feeling for the sacredness of family ties, relation of parent to child and grandchild, of child to parent and grandparent, are primary areas where one may expect to find the attitude of *dharma* exemplified" (Potter 1999, 9). Scholars have spoken before of the familial nature of the self in Hinduism. Alan Roland, for example, in his work *The Search for Self in India and Japan*, argues that Asian cultures have a *familial* notion of selfhood, whereas the West has an individualist one. Personhood is only conceivable in a web of familial relationships. Interestingly, Roland also remarks a strong mythic orientation as being characteristic of cultures with a "we-self" regard. "By constantly referring everyday relationships and situations back to the web of mythic images", Indians call up a "host of associative memories and connections about a person, and invest meaning in any and all situations".... "He is like Laxman (Rāma's devoted brother in the Rāmāyaṇa) [who] conveys images of loyalty and faithfulness in the most trying of circumstances" (Roland 1988, 254).

Let us return then to the larger question posed at the beginning of this paper: Is a familial sense of self compatible with ethics as we understand the term in Western usage? In other words, is it possible to evolve a set of principles for common behaviour, a standard of conduct that applies to all human beings at all times, if one is never simply a human being—one is always a parent or a child, a teacher or a student, a worker or a manager, a sweeper or a lawyer, or a grocery store clerk or unemployed? If one's conduct is fundamentally to be based on one's location in interlocking matrices of relationships, we can speak of *dharmas*, but can we speak of ethics? How, for example, do we elaborate social policies? Is it even possible to envision an ethic that embraces all of society?

6. Common Ethics within the Relational

It would seem from the above that it is not possible to envisage such an ethic, but that might be shortsighted. If one were to look again at the ideal of Rāma, one could argue that Rāma exerts himself for the welfare of all society in ways that are simultaneously congruent with the notion of family. In this vision, the concept of family is extended to include all beings, including animals.[23] Thus, all older women are recast as mothers, aunts, elder sisters. All youngers are cherished as daughters, all peers are indulged as sisters. Similarly, all older men are respected as being representative of one's father; younger men are guided as one would guide one's own sons, peers are treated as one's brothers. This kind of universalism is at the basis of much of normative Hindu practice,[24] though this kind of ethics has received less scholarly attention than that expounded in classical texts. In everyday practice, people relate to members of their own community in a web of relationships, real or fictive. The ideal is germane to the colloquial idiom of Indian languages in which a public address, for example, formally begins not with "Ladies and Gentlemen", but with "Brothers and Sisters."

In speaking of ethics that apply to all beings at all times, then, perhaps it is not absolutely necessary to postulate individuals who are unrelated to each other, as one is habituated to doing in modern Western moral philosophies. Perhaps it is possible to conceive of a universal ethics within a relational framework, within a concentric vision of family. What makes such a social organization also a moral one is the key requirement of self-negation, an ethic that is moreover ultimately consistent with the soteriological goals of the Hindu tradition, which stress ego-effacement. In the reverse of what one is conditioned to do in ordinary Western-style modern life, where one places high importance on individualistic goals, according to the ideals of *Rāmāyaṇa*, one should sacrifice one's own interests for the sake of one's nuclear family. One should sacrifice the interests of one's nuclear family for the sake of a more extended notion of family. Finally, one should sacrifice the interests of all narrow notions of family for the sake of broader notions of family, for *dharma*. "In taking the *dharma* attitude, one treats things commonly thought of as other than oneself as oneself; not, however... in a spirit of passion and possessiveness—but rather, in a spirit of respect" (Potter 1999, 8). *Dharma*, then, should be the ultimate focus of one's actions, and its

[23] The Hindu propensity for familial metaphors has been most obvious to the emerging discipline of environmental ethics, which notes the use of maternal imagery for the earth, and a familial sentiment for animals and other beings in society.

[24] The phenomenon of fictive kinship in normative Indian practice has been analyzed by some anthropologists. See, for example, Freed 1963, Vatuk 1969 and 1972; and Ross 1961.

playground is *loka*, "the world." One works ultimately for *lokasaṁgraha*, for the benefit of the world, setting aside all one's own narrow desires in order to achieve the larger good.[25] Social differences are never erased, but an overarching ethic is nevertheless articulated, in which the health and the well-being of the family—now conceived most broadly, as including all beings in the world—is the most valuable objective. One acts, therefore, for the sake of the family, for the good of the whole.

The moral probity of an action is established by an attitude of sternness with oneself. This is an absolute prerequisite to such an ethical system, what mitigates against the ruthless exploitation of the weak by the strong. The powerful must, as Rāma did, conduct themselves with an attitude of protectiveness toward the weak, and a disciplined rejection of personal interest. This is what keeps them from using their positions of power in self-serving and tyrannical ways. And where they err, a junior may gently guide them to their proper duties: as Rāma, however respectful of his father, insisted that his father maintain his integrity and fulfill his promises with all honesty, so all actors in a family, however junior, can bring that same moral compulsion to bear on their seniors, an insistence that they adhere to the precepts of *dharma*.[26] Ego-detachment, a spirit of disinterestedness in personal gain, are the only guarantors of honesty in the system.

Hinduism, then, does have embedded in its social psychology a universal ethics whose primary frame of reference is worldly, not soteriological, and which can become the basis for social activism. This universal ethic, however, relies upon relational metaphors rather than an ideology of individualism. While exerting oneself broadly for the whole, one's conduct yet always remains relational and contextual. This relational *dharma*, however, is significantly different from the relational ethics developed in the ethics of care pioneered by feminist theorists in the West. Whereas the ethics of care are also relational and contextual, and respond to events situationally, they are also *partial* in a way that Hindu ethics powerfully disapproves. The ethics of care, among other things, also "call for partiality, especially toward those who cannot protect themselves and to whom we are in special relationships. Our own children may not be owed any more than children in distant parts of the world; indeed our own children are probably owed less, given their already privileged position. But there is a value in preferring one's own child and striving to aid him or her" (May, Collins-Chobanian and Wong 1998, 10). While in actual practice, Hindu parents are no doubt as partial to their own children as parents anywhere, in Hindu *ideals*, such partiality is seen as being mean and lacking in largesse. In principle, Hindu ethics denies this kind

[25] This is the ideal of action envisioned, for example, by the Bhagavadgītā.

[26] This is one of the inspirations for the 'moral force' described by Gandhi in his technique of *satyagraha*.

of favoritism. According to the ideals set by Rāma, one is patient with hardship that comes to oneself and to one's kin, in favour of generosity to others. Rāma, incidentally very much like Gandhi in recent times, was hardest with himself and his immediate family, and compassionate with others further removed.

Conclusion

For generations, it has been commonplace to argue that Hinduism offers no coherent ethical theory, and to read Hindu ethics as being substantially no different from the *varṇāśramadharma*, reflecting a hopelessly stratified society that recognizes no universal principles of the Right. In this paper, I have tried to assess the accuracy of these persistent impressions through an exploration of the different genres of Hindu literature where one might search for common codes of ethics in Hinduism. I have argued that although it is conventional to look at the *Dharmaśāstra* literature for guidance on ethics, that in fact one is better served by investigating the Hindu epics. Although the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are classified in Western study as epic literature, they are largely didactic, and provide concentrated instruction on moral issues through discussions of ethics, and through the exemplary conduct of key figures in each text. I have focused here on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and its hero Rāma, but have offered my discussion only as a sample of what may be available in these classical texts. Hindu moral ideals, universal and particular, are encoded into the personalities of epic characters, and I believe that it is by focusing here that any discussion of Hindu ethical theory will bear its most fruitful results.

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